

Remarks on the Celebration of Eid al-Fitr and an Exchange With
Reporters
December 17, 2001

The President. Welcome. It's good to see everybody. Thank you all for coming. We want to thank you for coming to the White House to celebrate Eid. It's so nice of you to be here. It reminds us how much we all have in common, how similar boys and girls are, no matter what their religion may be. So thanks for being here today. We're really thrilled you're here.

Eid is a time of joy, after a season of fasting and prayer and reflection. Each year, the end of Ramadan means celebration and thanksgiving for millions of Americans. And your joy during this season enriches the life of our great country. This year, Eid is celebrated at the same time as Hanukkah and Advent. So it's a good time for people of these great faiths, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, to remember how much we have in common: devotion to family, a commitment to care for those in need, a belief in God and His justice, and the hope for peace on earth.

We also share a custom I know all of you are excited about, and that's giving gifts to children. And after this is over, I have a little gift for you from the White House. This season is meant to be a time of rejoicing as well as a time of generosity. I'm proud that our country, during Eid, is helping the people of Afghanistan. And I'm proud that the children of America, through America's Fund for Afghan Children, are giving food and clothes and toys to the children of Afghanistan.

The people of Afghanistan have suffered so much, and we're committed to helping them in their time of hardship and in their time of need. These are challenging days for our Nation, but holidays like this one remind us about how much we have to be thankful for and that God delights in joy and generosity of men and women and children. People of every faith are welcome

here in the people's house. People of every background are welcome to come here to the White House.

I want to thank you all for coming, and I'd like to go read—if you don't mind, read from a book to you. Is that okay? How about that? Let's go do that, and then we'll go back over here. We've got a special gift for you.

[At this point, the President read a poem entitled "Good Deeds."]

The President. Thank you all for coming. We're getting ready to leave. I may answer a few questions if you have some. Stretch, [Richard Keil, Bloomberg News] and then Ron [Ron Fournier, Associated Press].

Usama bin Laden

Q. Mr. President, have you—with the campaign against the Taliban winding down to a very small area of Afghanistan, will you consider this operation a success if Usama bin Laden is at large?

The President. Usama bin Laden is going to be brought to justice. It may happen tomorrow; it may happen in a month; it may happen in a year. But he is going to be brought to justice. He's on the run. He thinks he can hide, but he can't. We've been at this operation now for about 2½ months, and we've made incredible progress. And one of the objectives I've said, in this theater, in all theaters for that matter, is that we want Al Qaida killers brought to justice. And we'll bring him to justice.

Q. What do you know, sir, about whether he's still in Afghanistan? And have you spoken to the Pakistani Government about helping you to track him down if, in fact, he has fled across the border?

The President. Well, the Pakistanis will help us, and they are helping us look for

not only one—Usama bin Laden, but for all Al Qaida murderers and killers. They will be brought to justice. And it's just a matter of time, as far as I'm concerned. We've got all kinds of reports that he's in a cave, that he's not in a cave, that he's escaped, that he hasn't escaped. And there's all kinds of speculation. But when the dust clears, we'll find out where he is, and he'll be brought to justice.

Q. Will you order a military tribunal for him?

The President. You know, one thing at a time, Ron. I do have the option of military tribunals, because I think it's going to be a way to protect national security matters. But I'll make that judgment when we bring him to justice.

Anthrax Attacks

Q. On another matter, sir, have investigators concluded the anthrax used in the mailings have a domestic source? Are you looking for—

The President. Well, we're still looking on that. We've all got different feelings about it. I—and we're gathering as much information. And as soon as we make definitive conclusions, we'll share it with the American people.

Counterterrorism Efforts

Q. [Inaudible]—what the next steps might be in fighting terrorism in other countries or regions?

The President. Yes, we're looking. I mean, any time there is somebody harboring a killer or a terrorist, we will work with them to bring those people to justice. And one of the things I won't do, of course, is tell the enemy what our next move will be. I'm working to build—to keep our coalition strong.

Colin Powell and myself and others in the administration are constantly talking to world leaders to encourage them to cut off

money or disrupt killer cells that might be hiding in their countries. We've made great progress. We've arrested over—I think it's over 300 now. We're beginning to shut down financial institutions around the world.

Not every operation needs to be a military operation to be successful against the terrorist networks. And I'm pleased to tell you that the coalition is working cooperatively. And we're sharing a lot of intelligence between nations, and it's having effect.

Q. So might Iraq be next, probably?

The President. Oh, no, I'm not going to tell the enemy what's next. They just need to know that so long as they plan, and have got plans to murder innocent people, America will be breathing down their neck.

John Walker Lindh

Q. Mr. President, what are you learning about John Walker's involvement in the Taliban or Al Qaida, and should he face the death penalty if he's found to be a—

The President. I'm going to let the appropriate law enforcement agencies make recommendations to me. He has been questioned, properly questioned by the U.S. Government. I have yet to see the transcript myself. But we'll make the decision on what to do with Mr. Walker. He is a U.S. citizen. Obviously, I've said that U.S. citizens will not go into military tribunals. And so we'll make the determination whether or not he stays within the military system or comes into the civil justice system, the civil system in America.

Thank you all. Let's go in here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:12 p.m. in the Diplomatic Reception Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Usama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaida terrorist organization.